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BUSINESS NEWS

10 groups make EPA's list of Best Workplaces for Commuters list

By Shawn Turner

By 4:30 p.m., they start to gather outside Chittenden Bank in Burlington. Some casually chitchat while others wait for the bus that will whisk them away 10 minutes later.

Near the end of the line stands Allen Wannamaker, a product manager at the bank who routinely takes the bus with a group of his fellow employees on a brief trip to the employee parking lot near the General Dynamics building on Lakeside Avenue.

"At 5:05, it's like halfway back to the door," he said of the number of people lining the approximately 100-foot walk from the street to the bank's lobby at quitting time.

The \$15 a month Wannamaker would have to pay for the shuttle service has been picked up by Chittenden, one of the reasons the bank was named to the New England Best Workplaces for Commuters list by the Environmental Protection Agency.

"It helps the downtown area out because there would be more cars leaving at 5," he said. "That's another 70 or 80 cars you don't have to worry about."

In all, 10 Vermont groups made the list this year, up from four a year ago. Six on the list are Burlington-based.

The EPA hopes recognizing programs such as the one at Chittenden will help the nation cut down on rising levels of air pollution that can lead to such health problems as asthma.

"I think it's a tribute to the environmental leadership of both the city and the companies that choose to locate in that city," said Lucy Edmondson, transportation policy analyst for the EPA, of Burlington and its companies on the list.

COMMUTER PROGRAMS

Kathy Schirling, senior vice president at Chittenden, said the bank also reserves a number of spots at parking garages for employees. Reserving the parking spots has been done for more than a decade; the shuttle program has gone on for the past couple of years, she said.

The shuttle program costs in excess of \$30,000 a year for the bank, officials said. Costs for the parking spaces were not broken out.

Schirling said it is money well spent.

"It's important to us because we pride ourselves on our staff at Chittenden," she said. "We want to provide them with additional benefits so they'll continue to work for the bank. It also saves the environment."

Wannamaker, 35, of Essex Junction, moved to Vermont two years ago from Winston-Salem, N.C. While he does enjoy the attention given to commuters, it wasn't the deciding factor when it came to accepting the job.

"I think it's a great program," he said. "Where I come from, public transportation is not quite as flexible and much-used."

At Seventh Generation Inc., the Burlington company that distributes environmentally friendly products like biodegradable cleaning solutions, a number of employees are allowed to work a "compressed week."

"They might come in and work four 10-hour days," said Stephanie Lowe, human resources specialist. "It's really cutting down on mileage."

Vermont Energy Investment Corp. in Burlington provides on-site showers for commuters who bike to work. Bike storage is also available inside and bike racks are located outside, said Lucy Gluck, assistant to the executive director and energy educator.

“For me, when I’m stepping out the door and walk or bike to work, I feel like I’m making a difference in the environment and a difference in my personal budget,” she said.

The average price for a gallon of unleaded gasoline in Vermont was \$1.92 Thursday. The national average was \$1.86 that day, according to AAA.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Also sponsoring the program is the Alliance for Climate Action 10% Challenge program, a group trying to increase awareness of global warming and encouraging homes and businesses to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 10 percent.

“The most important thing we do is wake people up to the issue of global warming,” said Mary Sullivan, chairwoman of the alliance’s board. “Vermont will be a very changed place if temperatures rise over the next 50, 75 or 100 years.”

Greenhouse gases keep a planet’s heat in the atmosphere, warming the world. Scientists worry that if too high a concentration of these gases become trapped in the earth’s atmosphere, a “runaway greenhouse effect” could occur and temperatures could conceivably rise to uninhabitable levels.

Such a process is going on in the dense atmosphere of Venus, where temperatures reach 900 degrees.

The EPA has said most greenhouse emissions come from cars. Up to 75 percent of commuters drive alone.

“It is a problem,” Edmondson said. “Air pollution, especially in New England, pollution from cars and trucks is responsible for more than half of our ozone and smog problems.”

Each month, about five of the 140 employees at City Market in Burlington take advantage of a program that, like

Chittenden, provides up to \$33 a month to its employees for mass transit travel. The \$33 is about the cost of a monthly bus pass, said Julie Palagonia, human resources generalist.

“Every little bit does count,” she said.

Contact Shawn Turner at 660-1852 or sturner@bfp.burlingtonfree-press.com